



When Respecting Confidentiality is Risky

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The Subject

- Joe is a 35 year old male from Africa who is infected with HIV.
- For several years he has been receiving standard of care antiretrovirals as part of a research study at the NIH.

The Treatment

- Joe had been doing well on treatment until recently.
- In the past six months, Joe's status has declined and he was recently diagnosed with toxoplasmosis.

The Plan

- Joe received treatment for the toxoplasmosis.
- The team believes the toxoplasmosis is under control and plans to discharge Joe from the hospital.

The Cousin

- Joe cannot afford to live on his own, but is unable to identify anyone with whom he might live.
- The team searches for possible options for Joe and identifies a cousin who resides in the DC area.

The Concern

- The cousin knows that Joe has an illness. However, Joe does not want her told that he is HIV positive.
- The team suspects that he does not want his cousin to know that he is HIV positive because he is concerned about being stigmatized and rejected.

The Contact

- The team contacts Joe's cousin. She does not want to be bothered and initially is unwilling to have Joe stay with her.
- The team reassures her that Joe will likely not need nursing care. They also tell her that having him in the house should not pose a risk to her.

The Response

- After several conversations with the team, Joe's cousin agrees to pick him up from the hospital in one week.
- She agrees that he can live with her for at least 6 months.

The Risks

- The team agrees that Joe's toxoplasmosis and HIV pose very little risk to the cousin.
- There is a very small chance that Joe could experience a seizure as a result of the toxoplasmosis and the cousin might get bit if she attempts to help him during the seizure.

The Intervention

- The team tries to convince Joe to inform his cousin of his disease status.
- They suggest that doing so would show respect for the cousin and also might help him to have someone to talk to about his disease.

The Results

- The team tries on several occasions to convince Joe, but he continues to be unwilling to inform his cousin.
- The team suspects that he may eventually change his mind and tell her.

The Conflict

- Members of the team discuss the option of informing the cousin when she arrives that she should take precautions to avoid Joe's bodily fluids.
- Others express concern that this advice would be tantamount to informing the cousin that Joe is HIV positive.

Bioethics Consultation

- The team calls a bioethics consultation to discuss how best to handle the case.